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ABSTRACT

The positive and negative effects of a woman's return to shcool on herself and her family was the object of a study conducted in 1975. Two detailed questicnnaires were completed by 361 women attending three Detroit area universities. Of the 361 respondents, 33 of them had not remained in school for more than three consecutive semesters since their return and were considered "drop-outs." "Successful" students had either already graduated or were still in school. Hypotheses were proposed to identify variables that would distinguish drop-outs from successful students. It was anticipated that drop-outs (1) would experience more stress; (2) would receive less support from their husbands; and (3) would feel less positive about their marriages than would successful students. The chi square test of significance was emplcyed to test the differences between the two groups. Hypothesis I was upheld. Hypothesis II, testing husband support, yielded less clear-cut results. Responses involving the third hypothesis (attitude toward marriage) were also mixed. It was concluded that despite the problems and strains encountered in returning to school, the impact of education on these women has been profcund and the benefits well worth the costs. (Author)

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RETURNING WOMEN STUDENTS:

A STUDY OF STRESS AND SUCCESS

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Paper delivered at the Western Social Science Association annual convention, University of Arizona, Tempe, Arizona, April 30, 1976

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ABSTRACT

The positive and negative effects of a woman's return to school on herself and her family was the object of a study conducted in 1975. Two detailed questionnaires were completed by 361 women attending three Detroit area universities. The participants were mainly white, middle class, suburban housewives. Most were undergraduates; 50% had returned to school as freshmen. All were born prior to 1950, were married when they returned to school, had at least one child living at home, and had enrolled for eight or more credit hours the winter term of 1974. Of the 361 respondants (comprising 75% of the reachable subjects), 33 of them (9%) had not remained in school for more than three consecutive semesters since their return and were considered "drop-outs." "Successful" students had either already graduated or were still in school.

Hypotheses were proposed with the intention of identifying variables that would distinguish "drop-outs" from "successful" students. It was anticipated that "drop-outs" (I) would experience more stress, (II) would receive less support from their husbands, and (III) would feel less positive about their marriages than would "successful" students. The chi square test of significance was employed to test the differences between the two groups.

Hypothesis I was upheld. While at least half the women found specific areas to be problematic to some extent (e.g.: time for myself, time for children, taking on too many responsibilities, neglecting housework, integrating my responsibilities as student, wife, and mother), "drop-outs" indicated that these areas created significantly greater problems for them

than they did for the "successful" students. Hypothesis II, testing husband support, yielded less clear-cut results. While husbands of "drop-outs" offered significantly less functional support (i.e. help with household chores) than husbands of "successful" students, the amount of perceived emotional support received from the husbands was not significantly different between the two groups. Responses involving the third hypothesis (attitude toward marriage) were also mixed. It became obvious that in many instances the women's return to school had positive effects on their marriages, even for "drop-outs." On the other hand, when asked how satisfied they were with their marriages before re-entry and at the present time, the women who had been very satisfied initially now gave distinctly divergent responses: the "successful" students' opinions rose significantly and the "drop-outs'" opinions fell significantly

In addition to these hypotheses, the purely positive effects of returning to school were discussed, particularly as they related to the women's personal growth. It was concluded that despite the problems and strains encountered in returning to school, the impact of education on these women has been profound and the benefits well worth the costs.

This research project has been funded by a dissertation grant from the U. S. Department of Labor, Manpower Division.

Background and Rationale

As you who are involved with higher education are probably aware, greater numbers of mature women, particularly housewives and mothers, are returning to school than ever before. Whether it is to begin or upgrade a career or simply to develop and expand their talents and interests, women are returning to education at all levels. This runs the gamut from non-credit adult education courses to university programs offering advanced degrees. In 1972, the Labor Department reported that 262,000 women aged 35 years and over were enrolled in colleges as undergraduate and graduate students (U.S. Department of Labor: "Going Back to School at 35," 1972). Of these, seven out of ten were married and nearly all were in school part-time.

While a return to school requires adjustments of everyone, women who continue their educations after their families are started face particular difficulties. The demands of being a student in addition to wife and mother often result in considerable strain on the established family routine and require new adjustments of everyone. This particular project on returning women students was devised to explore the ways in which families react to the housewives' return to school and the ways in which the women handle the challenges that confront them. One object of this study was to locate variables that would distinguish "drop-outs" from "successful" students. A "successful" student is defined as the returning student who was able to either complete a degree or teaching certificate within a time span of at least a year and a half from her return to college or to continue taking courses

for at least a year and a half. A "drop-out" is defined as the student who was unable to remain in school for more than three semesters after her return.

Considering these two groups, I will report results involving three distinct areas: the amount of stress, feelings toward the marriage and degree of husband support experienced by the returning women students. It was hypothesized that "drop-outs" would experience more stress, feel less positive about their marriages and would receive less support from their husbands than would "successful" students. Chi square analysis was employed and results at the .05 level of significance and greater will be reported. In addition, I will include comments made by the women themselves where relevant. I have attempted to choose those statements that are not only well articulated but are also representative of the thoughts expressed by a majority of the women on a particular subject.

Methodology

The subjects of the study were chosen from among women enrolled in three universities in the Detroit metropolitan area in the winter of 1974. It was anticipated that the time span of a year and a half between date of enrollment -- i.e. winter, 1974 -- and date of receiving the questionnaire -- i.e. summer, 1975 -- would allow for the establishment of a "drop-out" as well as a "successful" returning student population.

The women were selected for the study according to the following parameters: they were married at the time of their return to school, were age 26 or older, had at least one child living at

home while they were enrolled, and were carrying 8 credit hours or more. In June, 1975, the women were sent a 12-page questionnaire; that November, they received a two-page supplementary questionnaire. In addition, the women who had not returned the initial questionnaire were sent another one. After a number of follow-up phone calls, 361 women, or 75% of the reachable subjects, returned usable questionnaires. Of those, 33 women or 9%, were "drop-outs." While this number is small, the difference in responses between "drop-outs" and "successful" students, is significant enough in key areas to warrant serious consideration.

Description of the Subjects

The women who participated in the study were mainly white (85%) middle-class, suburban housewives, ranging in age from 26 to 61 with an average age of 39. Ninety percent of all women ("drop-outs:" 85%) were either still married or had remarried. Their husbands were well-educated and many held positions at supervisory and professional levels. The number of children in the families studied ranged from 1 to 10 and the average number of children per family was 4. While the average age of the youngest child was in the 7 to 12 year age range, over 10% of the women had at least one child under the age of 3.

The women were basically homemakers. Over half of them had been home full-time the year before they returned to school and had not been involved in volunteer work. These were women who grew up with the idea that home and family came first and they returned to school not out of a need to eventually get a job (16%)

but basically for intellectual stimulation (84%) and to obtain a feeling of achievement (77%). Fifty percent of the women came back as freshmen. They had already "proved" themselves as wives and mothers but had not yet "proved" themselves as students. What was to be their experience?

Results

In the beginning, they were unsure and lacked confidence. As one woman described it:

> "Returning to school was exciting, but it was also kind of scary. I had been away for so long that I wasn't really certain of my intellectual abilities any more. After 8 years of conversing with pre-schoolers every day, I wasn't sure I could hold my own in a college discussion."

And if that wasn't enough, these women faced other tensions at home. About half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statements:

"Returning to school was initially stressful for me" and "I frequently take on more than I should." In fact, a look at the "Potential Problems" chart will show that at least two-thirds of

the women found the following areas to be problematic to some extent:

time for myself
time for children
taking on too many responsibilities
neglecting housework
integrating my responsibilities as
student, wife and mother.

It should be noted that in every one of these areas, the "drop-outs" indicated significantly higher responses at the "Big Problem" level than did the "successful" students.

How did the women feel about the problems? With regard to the demands made on their time, they felt frustrated. As one woman commented:

"Time for myself -- that's a constant battle.
There is never time for me when I can
completely relax."

The women felt most guilty with regard to spending too little time with their children, next, to neglecting their housework and third, to spending time with their husbands. I am not sure if this means that husbands followed third in line in importance after housework, or if the husbands were actually less neglected than the housework; I suppose it depends on the woman. . .

Before I leave this "Potential Problems" chart, I would like to comment on two areas that did not rate "high" as problems by at least half the women. These were: "Asking husband to take on more responsibilities" and "asking children to take on more

responsibilities. In a number of cases it appears that the reason these were not considered a problem was that the women never asked their husbands and/or children to take on more responsibilities in the first place. The following comment is typical:

> "I am the type of person that felt that laundry chores, etc., were my responsibility and I would get frustrated a lot because I never had any free time for myself. My family was willing to help if I asked, but I didn't feel I had the right to ask."

Whether it was due to long established habit or ingrained pressure to meet traditional expectations, these women heaped burden upon burden on themselves -- perhaps unnecessarily -- in an effort to maintain their standing as "Super Mom" and "Super Wife" (and now, "Super Student") even at the expense of their health. The "drop-outs" particularly reflected this situation. It was they who were significantly more tired and in poorer health than the "successful" students. And it was their husbands who were most threatened when they returned to school and who offered significantly less functional support (i.e. actual help with household chores) than the husbands of "successful" students.

Incidently, I might add that over half the "drop-outs" as compared to a third of the "successful" students were employed part-time or full-time while they were going to school, thus amplifying the problems of stress they were under. The hypothesis predicting greater stress on the part of "drop-outs" appears to be definitely upheld. Results concerning the hypothesis

regarding husband support are less clear cut. While the husbands of "drop-outs" are significantly less helpful in terms of their functional support, the differences in the husbands' emotional support as reported by the two groups are not as distinctive.

So far, this discussion of returning women students has focused on the more negative effects of the return to school. What about the positive side? In another section of the questionnaire, the women were asked what positive effects their return to school had on themselves, their husbands, their marriages, and their children.

With regard to themselves, over 90% of all women reported positive effects in terms of personal growth. The following comment is illustrative:

> "I'm more confident, even more independent, I feel stronger. I'm more understanding of what is really necessary to my family and me. I'm more appreciative of my husband, I like him more. My family and our lives have been enriched. As a mother, wife, student, I am a more interesting person and more aware. School is a very important part of my life. I enjoy and get a real high from the exposure to new ideas. I am not sure whether it's school or a "natural" maturing process, but I've been able to sort out a great deal about what is really important to me during the time I have returned to school. The stimulation from new ideas and challenges to my own thinking are so apparently missing in the day to day life I lead away from school and its environment."

Asked about the positive effects on their husbands, over 50% of all women indicated that their husbands showed greater appreciation, satisfaction, and pride in their wives. Related one woman:

> "Pride taken in my struggles and achievements led him to value me more as a person."

Said another:

> "Because I am happier, he is happier. He is more cooperative and understanding of my needs."

This increased satisfaction was reflected in effects on the marriage. Fifty-five percent of the "successful" students and even 45% of the"drop-outs" reported some improvement in their marriage since the women returned to school. However, consideration of a different question concerning marriage yields more diversive results. When the women were asked how they felt about their marriage at the time of re-entry and at present, the "drop-outs" and "successful" students gave significantly different responses at the "very satisfied" level: 39% of the "drop-outs" were "very satisfied" at the time of re-entry compared to 29% at present, and 32% of the "successful" students were "very satisfied" at the time of re-entry compared to 42% at present. Thus, while the hypothesis that "drop-outs" will feel less positive about their marriages than "successful" students appears to be upheld to some extent, it is also evident that the women's return to school has/had also beneficial effects on the attitudes of husbands of both groups and upon their marriages.

What about the children? Did they benefit from their mothers' return to school? Over a third of the women indicated that their children developed more pride in and respect for their mothers while a quarter of the group (a third of the"drop-outs") mentioned that their children took on higher academic goals for themselves. Relates one woman:

> "The entire experience has benefited everyone in the family. TV watching is on the wane, interest in art, history and letters is 1,000% higher in this household. I will never stay at home full-time again. Dislike card parties and luncheons and chit-chat, have continued volunteer work while being student. Have gotten intellectual and spiritual stimulation from school experience which has also affected children and husband. Children have become more academically oriented. What you value, they value. Wish I had started back to school sooner -- I have wasted a lot of time."

I hope it has become evident that despite the problems and frustrations these women have had to deal with when they went back to school, the experience of becoming a student again has yielded overwhelmingly positive results for the majority of the women and their families. Over 90% of the women, "drop-outs" included, agreed that

> "I have become more self-confident as a result of returning to school"
>
> and
>
> "Returning to school has been an exhilerating experience."

I entitled this presentation: "What Price Education? Emotional Costs for Returning Women Students." We have discussed the costs -- for some they have been high -- but the returns have been bountiful and well worth the investment. Returning to school has changed these women's lives for the better -- as one woman put it:

> "It's been the most gratifying experience! I feel as though I have been reborn. When out of classes, I'm very frustrated. I feel a tremendous void. . . . Perhaps I shall go to school until the age of 90."

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS CHART

All Subjects, N=361
Successful, N=328
Drop-Outs, N=33

Areas of Potential Problems		Seriousness of the Problem for you: % No Problem	% Some Problem	% Big Problem	Your Feelings: % Guilty	% Angry	% Frustrated
					All Subjects		
Time for myself	All Subjects	21	59	20			
	Successful			19	10	12	56
	Drop-Out			33*			
Time with husband	All Subjects	46	46	9			
	Successful			8	19	8	23
	Drop-Out			16			
Time for children	All Subjects	33	57	9			
	Successful			8	39	4	18
	Drop-Out			21*			
Taking on too many responsibilities	All Subjects	33	51	17			
	Successful			14	9	7	48
	Drop-Out			42**			
Asking husband to take on more responsibilities	All Subjects	50	32	18			
	Successful			18	15	18	14
	Drop-Out			22			
Asking children to take on more responsibilities	All Subjects	54	41	5			
	Successful			4	12	12	12
	Drop-Out			6			
Neglecting housework	All Subjects	33	51	16			
	Successful			15	22	7	24
	Drop-Out			30*			
Integrating my responsibilities as student, wife and mother	All Subjects	33	53	14			
	Successful			11	13	8	31
	Drop-Out			33**			

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

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